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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 002445

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA, WHA/PPC, WHA/USOAS, AND WHA/CEN
NSC FOR DAN FISK

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SUBJECT: BIO OF MEL ZELAYA, APPARENT WINNER OF HONDURAN
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 2442 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ford;
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Jose Manuel "Mel" Zelaya Rosales was born September 9, 1952 in Juticalpa, Olancho. His home is now outside of Catacamas, Olancho. Olancho has long been known as the "Wild West" of Honduras. He studied (but apparently did not earn a degree in) civil engineering at the Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) in the late 1960s. Out of university, he worked for many years in business, becoming well known for his wood products/sawmilling business, eventually being named director of the Honduran Logging Association. He is seen as a slick agro-businessman by some and a down-home farmer by others. He entered Liberal Party politics in the 1980s, becoming a congressman from the Department of Olancho, where he quickly gained a reputation as an outspoken opponent of U.S. policy. He was the first to publicly oppose the presence of the Nicaraguan Contra insurgency in Honduras (1986), and went so far as calling the presence of U.S. troops in Honduras illegal.

2. (C) Zelaya continued in congress until 1994, when he was named (cabinet-level) Director of the Social Investment Fund of Honduras (FHIS) at the beginning of the Carlos Reina administration (1994-1998). He served in that position throughout the Reina administration and into the Carlos Flores administration (both Liberal Party governments). His tenure of over five years is by Honduran standards an unusually long time for a cabinet minister to serve in the same post. During his time at FHIS, Zelaya's criticism of U.S. policy softened, and over time he established positive working relationships with U.S. officials. His term at FHIS ended in June of 1999 when then-President Flores required any minister that was planning to run for President to quit the cabinet, which occasion Zelaya used to announce his presidential run. Zelaya's 2001 presidential candidacy faltered in the primaries, losing to Rafael Pineda Ponce (who subsequently lost to Nationalist Ricardo Maduro in the general elections), but Zelaya remained a leading force within the Liberal Party during the Maduro administration. Zelaya subsequently mounted another presidential campaign and easily beat a crowded field of eight candidates in the February 2005 Liberal Party presidential primary.

3. (C) Allegations of involvement with drug trafficking and other forms of illicit enrichment have cropped up periodically since at least 1988, but there is no reporting to substantiate such allegations. During his tenure at FHIS, that agency was considered to be comparatively well-run and effective by local standards. The overall arc of his career shows him to be flawed within the range of normal for Honduran politicians, but basically well-meaning.

4. (C) Zelaya's family tree raises eyebrows. He has three younger brothers: Carlos, Marco Antonio, and Hector (now deceased). Hector was allegedly involved with drugs, and reportedly was murdered in a crime designed to look like a suicide together with his girlfriend, Mayra Zavala, and two other men in the 1970s. Carlos, who later became a congressman, was reportedly driving a car used in the kidnapping of Camilo Giron and Junior Kafati (the son of Salomon Kafati), who were later murdered (in the early 1980s). Although he claimed to be innocent, Carlos served 10 years in jail in connection with this incident. Zelaya's parents were Jose Manuel Zelaya Ordonez (now deceased) and Hortensia Zelaya, rich and connected farmers in Olancho. On July 25, 1975, the military massacred 14 people, including 11 peasants and three clergy, involved in land reform protests. The massacre reportedly took place on a farm named Los Horcones owned by Zelaya's father in Olancho. Two military officers were convicted in 1978 of murder; the other defendants were reportedly acquitted. The incident is mentioned in the 1977-1979 U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights section on Honduras (Zelaya's father is not specifically named). Zelaya's father was reportedly jailed in connection with this massacre, but later released after apparently spending seven years in jail without a conviction. There is no evidence that Zelaya himself was involved in any of these violent events which were brought to the surface again during the recent presidential campaign. In addition,

Zelaya's paternal grandmother was reportedly murdered with a machete by a workman on the same farm when Zelaya was a young child. Zelaya is said to be the one who found the body.

15. (SBU) Zelaya is married to Xiomara Castro de Zelaya (born September 30, 1959) and they have four children: Jose Manuel, Xiomara, Hector, and Zoe. He is Roman Catholic, and often cites his strongly held religious beliefs in public statements. Xiomara's father is Irena Castro Reyes, a prominent lawyer whose clients include key National Party figures: businessman Miguel Facusse and former President Raphael Leonardo Callejas among others. Zelaya is related to former President Carlos Reina (now deceased), also of the Liberal Party. Zelaya does not speak English.

16. (C) If one was to judge Zelaya's future administration by his campaign, there might be room for concern as far as organization is concerned. His campaign was often unfocused, unorganized, and emphasized "citizen power" rather than a specific "government plan." However, Zelaya has a good reputation from his days as a minister and much of the disorganization seems to flow from Zelaya's friendly cowboy image, as opposed to more structured politicians who stay on message. Zelaya is widely seen as a charismatic (if allegedly intellectually weak) politician whose strengths come out in retail politics. He is known as an insomniac who does most of his decision-making between midnight and 3:00 am and gives little attention to punctuality.
Ford